

Penitent Voice From The CIA Front Lines

Former Agent John Stockwell Has Gone Public
With His Revelations on Africa and Vietnam

By Sally Quinn

"We were only playing a game," he says, fingering the heavy silver cross which hangs on a long chain across his chest. "I was serving the home office. I was doing what I was supposed to do. There are definite threads of guilt in my past. These things trouble me. But I'm less bothered since I left and I'm not doing them any more."

John Stockwell leans against the banquette of the Madison Hotel coffee shop, speaking in slow deliberate tones, only a slight Texas lilt in his voice. He is clear-eyed, direct and humorless. He sits ramrod straight and talks with the same ease and absence of emotion as anyone would who has repeated horrible stories so many times that they become devoid of meaning.

He is quite handsome at 40. In fact, if you didn't know he was a former CIA agent you might take him for a country singer.

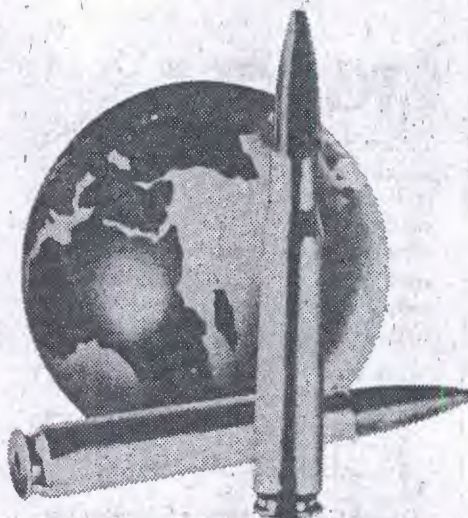
He has the mustache of the day, the proper long sideburns, the red turtleneck sweater under the sport jacket, the chain and cross hanging around his neck.

It is the same handsome, controlled face, the same unflinching gaze that millions of people first saw Sunday night on "Sixty Minutes" when John Stockwell went public after a year and a half in secrecy writing his expose of the CIA Angola operation, "In Search of Enemies—A CIA Story."

He talks about the "threads of guilt," "the things that bother him." Like for instance the coup he almost engineered while he was stationed in Abidjan, the Ivory Coast.

It was in a small neighboring country which he refused to name. He recruited an agent, then insisted that the agent find unrest. The agent couldn't find any unrest. "Well," asked Stockwell, "what about your cousin?" The agent was on the payroll. Without unrest he would lose his fee. The agent reported his cousin was unhappy. Soon the cousin was promoting a coup. "We hatched ourselves a little plot," says Stockwell, solemnly. But the cousin had agitated a coup and soon Stockwell was meeting secretly with the president of the country at night to warn him. The coup was averted the night before it was scheduled. His agent was arrested and thrown in jail for seven years.

"It never occurred to me then," he says now,



"Here," he says, "I would be chief of staff. There was no force that was going to make me resign for the next three months. I was confident I knew what it was about. And it was a very competitive situation."

Angola—next assignment—next disappointment. "It was a hard and somewhat disgusting lesson. Covert little wars don't work. Thirty million dollars is not enough. Thirty million dollars is a nothing war. And besides, being secret you could do nothing."

For the first time in the interview John Stockwell demonstrates some passion. "If we'd had Puff The Magic Dragon (a specially equipped aircraft)," he says, "it's got tons of bullets, it's incredible, if we'd had that weapon we would have won the war in Angola. But we could never have done it secretly the way we had to. I felt a covert operation would never work."

So it was then that John Stockwell finally decided to resign from the Agency.

"I spent six months making the decision," he says. "Should I resign, put on a trenchcoat and walk off into the fog as spies are supposed to do? Should I go to a reporter, cut off my options for the future, cause a stir and totally cut myself off from the agency, or should I write a book and tell the full story?"

The book won out. And he didn't have to wrestle with his conscience long. "I think it would be impossible to write such a book if I believed the agency was essential to national security."

And for this reason he has no objections to anyone leaving the agency and spilling the goods. He believes, instead, that the CIA should be an intelligence-gathering organization only, with no covert operations, no involvement in paramilitary operations.

"I have wound up profoundly skeptical and distrustful of the secrecy game," he says. "Secrecy breeds mediocrity and arrogance."

He says he will not make a career off of the CIA but that he doesn't know what he will do with his life after "I see this thing through."

He has a couple of ideas, though.

"Writing a novel about Africa and Vietnam," says John Stockwell, a novice in the New Morality. "And of course journalism is a possibility."

